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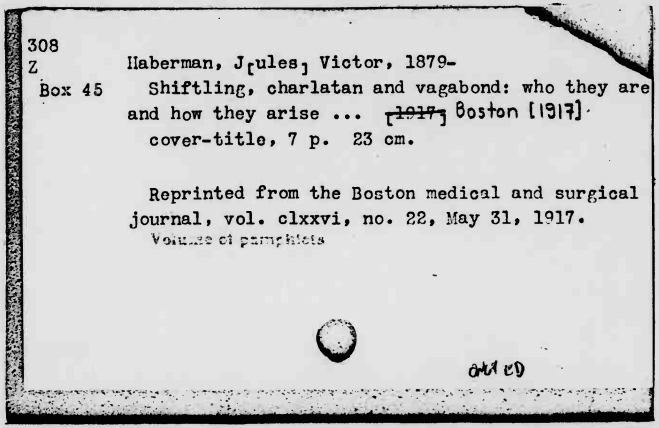
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SHIFTLING, CHARLATAN AND VAGABOND: WHO THEY ARE AND HOW THEY ARISE

BY

J. VICTOR HABERMAN, A.B., M.D., D.M.S. (BERLIN)

NEW YORK CITY

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SHIFTLING, CHARLATAN AND VAGABOND: WHO THEY ARE AND HOW THEY ARISE.*

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AN interesting group of abnormals, found the whole world over, as commonplace as the sparrow and quite as drab and unattractive—unless one focus with special sentiment upon him—is the truant, shiftling and tramp, the good-for-nothing or "bum," the swindler, rogue, pathological liar or charlatan, and last, but not least, the vagabond (mendicant, peddler, mountebank, etc., falling for the most part into the rubric of the latter). These individuals have a strange kinship among themselves, and a distinct relation, either remotely or intimately, with the problems of delinquency and crime—and their study leads into one of the most fascinating highways of psychopathology and psychopathically engendered wrong, with byways into alluring fields of story and romance.

Who are they, how do they arise, and how do they transmit? Are their offspring like themselves? Does the truant, for instance, who becomes the good-for-nothing shiftling, have shiftlings for children?

* This is the third of a series of studies on heredity (in its relation to psychopathy, clinical psychology and criminology) and the differentiation of abnormal types of character and personality. For the general discussion, see *Medical Record*, Feb. 24, 1917; for the study of the degenerate, etc., see *The Archives of Diagnosis*, April-May, 1917.

The real truant, to begin with, is the psychopathic child who suddenly "runs away," mostly not knowing why, overcome by an acute inner *impellance* to "go," to "shift somewhere," to be "off in the open." He not only cuts school, he strays from home. After we eliminate the epileptic and hysterical fugues (*automatisme ambulatoire*) we still have a large class of such dromomanics to deal with* in whom a strange nomadic unrest is rife and latent, and in whom some simple provocation (pique, quarrel or even less) sets off an intense dysphoria that starts the process going. They may or may not return; but one thing is certain, they will soon "hie hence" again. Such lives are not infrequently spent in constant aimless wanderings.

These, then, are the later shiftlings who stick to nothing, who are chronically dissatisfied, who can never attain enough stability to achieve anything—a trade, a livelihood, an ambition, a home and family. They just shift. One finds them among both the ignorant and the intelligent (many of the *instabiles* and *déséquilibrés* of the French belonging here). Among the women not a few are finally found in the ranks of prostitution. This condition must not be considered an entity, but just a manifestation of psychopathy, with lability of mood, and the proneness to dissatisfaction (dysphoria) as the

* See A. Pick, "Ueber einige bedeutsame Psycho-Neurosen des Kindesalters," Halle, 1904. Pick speaks of the condition as arising out of the soil of "Psychasthenia." He does not, however, mean the psychasthenia of Janet, but constitutional psychopathy. See Ziehen's studies of the Psychopathic Constitution; also the author's paper (Med. Review of Reviews, March, 1912) and literature therein cited. See also the monograph of E. Stier, "Wandertrieb und Pathologisches Fortlaufen bei Kindern," Jena, 1913; part iv of A. Cullerre's "Les frontières de la folie," Paris, 1889; B. Maurice's "Les fugues chez les enfants," Paris, 1900; Hermann Müller's "Vom Wandertrieb," Zeit. f. d. Erforsch. und Behand. des jugend, Schwach. Bd. v, 1912; Heilbronner, "Über Fugues," Jahr. f. Psychiatrie, 1903.

most prominent characteristics. Should there be children, the hereditary transmission is that of psychopathy, mild or severe.

The good-for-nothing* (corner loafer, gadabout, bum, etc.) is another type found wherever earth is travelled over, who through an inferiority in moral make-up, a lack of cortical "backbone," as it were, is utterly unable to maintain himself in even the most elementary trappings as a member of a community. He is wanting in self-esteem and honor, and hence can awaken no regard in others. What you or "society" may think of his appearance or deportment does not concern him. The opprobrium attached to failure, to not-getting-on, to the complete disregard of paying debts, to laziness, tatters, filth, leaves him quite untouched. He is *characterless*. With special nicety one may say of such an individual that he has no *respectability*,—no one respects him. This is the "Lump" of the Germans, our nearest equivalent being probably "bum" (with a slightly different shading). *He will not work*.† He sees no need of earning or saving, or indeed of possessing anything. He shuffles passively through life, eking out his miserable existence through borrowing, begging and taking.‡

* See the chapter "Lumpen, Bummler und Vagabunden" in Pelman's "Psychische Grenzzustände," Bonn, 1912. Many interesting facts will also be found in Jacob Riis' "How the Other Half Lives," 1890.

† This recalcitrance to work is also found in families of "high degree" who are far too proud to work (but not to borrow and accept), who, though their *houses* have long since fallen into dilapidation, still stick to their pride, their hauteur and their traditions. Nor have they usually any great anxiety about paying their debts. Very probably we get our phrases "trumpery baron," "shoddy aristocrat," etc., from these types.

‡ Such types begin their careers very early in life, do not remain at school, are then tried at work, but cannot stick, soon take no more jobs, and "hang around" and deteriorate. Sometimes childhood and early adult life starts apparently fairly well, but drink rapidly demoralizes this individual. Most have very scant schooling, but must not be considered innately feeble-minded.

But even for this poor mortal it may at times become difficult to keep life and limb together, and, *not being constituted for work*, his appropriation assumes more formidable proportions—he steals. This practice may then become common habit. Need and chance accident may even lead to felony and murder. Here we have a special type of delinquency and especial *genre* of criminal to keep in mind.*

The same good-for-nothing may, oddly enough, have a tendency to veneer his ill-fame in quilted colors. He tells wild-goose tales of escapades, and puts point and effect to the meanest matter. Thus we get the conventional braggard and liar—a character of all times. Though quite callous to his real condition, he nevertheless tries to play a part in the eyes of others. With a little better intelligence we have the swindler and charlatan. The lying of these individuals is frequently of a peculiar kind, a mingling of small fact with abundant fancy (confabulation) and an added inkling to credulity in their own fabrications, even a tendency at times to pose as the actual of a highly fictitious part (*pseudologia phantastica* or pathological lying).† It must always be remembered that this lying does not count for lying in such abnormal minds—it is really believed. The Korsakoff psychosis also confabulates, though in a somewhat dissimilar way, falsifying monstrously, and, even though you point out the discrepancies, remains quite unconcerned.

* This type, it should be remembered, is really not a criminal type in the strictest sense. These are passive individuals, never active seekers for trouble.

† See "Die Pathologische Lüge und die Psychisabnormen Schwindler," Anton Delbrück, Stuttgart, 1891; also chapter I of O. Hinrichsen's "Zur Psychologie und Psychopathologie des Dichters," Wiesbaden, 1911. A. McLane Hamilton reported an extremely interesting case in the Medical Record, vol. lxvii, p. 905. Splendid examples in literature are Daudet's "Tartarin de Tarascon," Immermann's inimitable "Münchausen," and Keller's "Der Grüne Heinrich." Ibsen's "Peer Gynt" probably also belongs here.

The names of Daudet, Immermann, etc., in our footnote take us quite some distance from the theme of "good-for-nothing," and lead over an interesting association bridge—the one terminal in story, the other in fact—to such characters in actual life who are surely "good-for-much," yet abnormal, exotic, *different*, who live hazy, mystic lives, half in the fiction of their own dreaming, and no little determined by really pathologic trends. Here we think of Shelley, Coleridge, DeQuincey, Verlaine, of poor Chatterton and probably of our unhappy Poe, of visionaries like Blake, Swedenborg and Newman, and a list of hundreds of others, had we a peep into all the master souls. The strange mental motley of these higher typed individuals, the sincerity of whom we do not question, should teach us to be fairminded enough to weigh, and likewise accept as sincere the unusual combinations in the lower types as we see them, to endeavor to understand through *appreciation* rather than criticism, for appreciative analysis gives a fairer picture here than the critical. *Humani nihil a me alienum puto.* This might be our motto in deciphering and judging all the abnormals, good, bad and indifferent, high typed or low typed, brought before us. After all, there is a good bit of the fictitious even in much that we cherish as truth in our own minds—we supposed normals—and many of our plans, our dreams and our desires are more real for us, and more in keeping with our mental status than the soberest of our cometrue realities.

The common vagabond is more than mere shiftling. This class (again a very extensive world-class) is made up of physical and mental derelicts—usually both feeble-minded and psychopathic. Of 404 such chronic vagabonds

(gewohnheitsmässige Landstreichern) studied by Bonhöffer[1], 74% had to be called mentally abnormal, and at least 53% feeble-minded; 60% were chronic alcoholics, and quite a number epileptics. According to Ziehen[2] at least 30% are "hereditary degenerative psychopathic constitutions." "This vagabondage," writes Pelmann, "is the great reservoir out of which delinquency is resourced." Real criminals, however, are rare among them; they haven't the energy for this. As to the heritable transmissibility in these cases, it will be seen, this may be a rather complicated affair.

The above pathological forms in varying combinations, especially with the admixture of intelligence or even talent or genius, give us some of the most interesting characters we happen upon in life and fiction. From this class come all our picaresque heroes of romance,* from Cervantes' "Don Quixote," Grimmelshausen's "Simplizissimus," Lesage's "Gil Blas," through the well-known characters drawn by a score of England's gypsy souls†—Defoe, Smollett, Scott, Borrow, Stevenson—to mention but a few—up to our more modern "beloved vagabonds" of Lock, R. H. Davis, Weir Mitchell and others. The vagabond has been perhaps the romantic top-notcher of the group, but he has been only one of the many types out of rascaldom literarily portrayed for us. How near to human interest of today these types come one only recognizes when one thinks of the fame of "'Raffles" and of "Sherlock Holmes" (to say nothing of Nick Carter!), and of the stage popularity of

* See, for instance, Chandler's "Romances of Roguery," Part 1, MacMillan & Co.; also "The Literature of Roguery," in two volumes, Houghton, Mifflin & Co., 1907; also "Elizabethan Rogues and Vagabonds and their Representation in Contemporary Literature," F. Aydelotte. The Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1913.

† And England has been especially rich in these—Spain, however, having supplied the source and the beginning.

crime and detection, and the abnormal. Indeed, these elements of unrest, psychopathy, vagrancy, and the soon encountered company of poverty, uncleanliness, immoderation and social disrectitude upon which we righteous look with such sorry contempt, are all more deeply ingrained in the world's history—and our own natures—than we are usually aware. They are the secrets behind those great movements of the crusades (the children's crusade proved it), the Elizabethan and post-Elizabethan voyages and wanderings, the rush to the Klondike and our West; and out of these same elements sprang the Goliardi or intinerant students of the middle ages—that strange confraternity of the open road (*Socias sanctae confratiae*) and forerunner of the modern university! In spite of their learning, these scandalous students, were they here today, would be considered as outlawed to a community, as the men of Coxey's army, all of them candidates for prison internships, with a goodly overflow for the hospital and madhouse.*

It is perhaps not very far-fetched, after all, to say that we are, most of us, of the same stuff the other fellow's made of, only it is quantity, not quality, in the arrangement of the make-up that characterizes one from the other.

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[2] Psychiatrie, Leipzig, 1908, p. 578.

* See the introduction to the translation of the Carmina Burana by John Addington Symonds, under title of "Wine, Women and Song," and the songs themselves. Th. B. Mosher Co., Portland, Me., 1899; also the reprinted (1849) "The Fraternitye of Vacabondes" by Awdeley, "A Sermon in Praise of Thieves and Thievery," by Halen, and "A Caveat or Warening for Common Cursetors," by Harmon, all three in one volume, Trubner & Co., London, MDCCCLXIX.

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